"That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence."(Christopher Hitchens) Is this true?

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Without evidence, a claim is relatively weak and has nothing to fall back on. This is true for most areas of knowledge, however not for all.Knowledge can be defined as having an explanation, an understanding or a reasoning of an area of knowledge.[[1]](#footnote-2) This being said, all knowledge requires evidence to explain it, or to give an understanding of it. This is true for almost all areas of knowledge with the exception of religion as it is a question of faith.There is no generalized correct answer; however for the majority of the areas of knowledge, it is reasonable to apply Christopher Hitchens statement;"That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence." Nevertheless the fact that religion requires faith, which needs no evidence, means that Christopher Hitchens statement is generalized and therefore incorrect.

In the natural sciences I will be focusing on mathematics as an example, however the evaluation of this area of knowledge can be applied to the other natural sciences. It is reasonable to say that any idea, theory or claim can be dismissed in the natural sciences if it is not backed up by evidence. Vice versa any claim backed up by evidence cannot be dismissed. This can be seen in mathematics. Pythagoras (in the 6th century BCE) was the first person to prove that c2=a2+b2 must be true for all right-angled triangles. It is the fact that he proved the theory that makes it unquestionable. Pythagoras theorem is inevitably and indefinitely true. It has been mathematically proven and consequently it is reasonable to say it cannot be dismissed because it has substantial evidence backing it up. For this reason mathematics is known as “the sciences of rigorous proof”[[2]](#footnote-3). Using reason as a way of knowing it should be obvious to anyone that this knowledge is correct and cannot be questioned, inevitably speaking in favor of Christopher Hitchens statement. Evidently this works both ways. Without evidence claims can simply be dismissed in this area of knowledge because the natural sciences attempt to understand the world around us. This being said, without evidence there is no actual understanding of the world.

There is a major difference between the truthfulness in the different sciences. In Mathematics theories are established by using an axiom, it is a statement which can be assumed to be true, or is self evidently true. By then using deductive reasoning it is possible to arrive at a conclusion, if the axioms are correct and the logic is flawless then the conclusion will be undeniably valid and can be termed a theorem. Anything established as knowledge using this will forevermore be true. In the other natural sciences this is not the case. They are constantly progressing and theories can be truthful in their own context until new knowledge surrounding the theory is gained that might alter the validity of them, e.g. the progression of the understanding of atomic molecules. As long as there is enough evidence to deem a theory truthful it will be true, until it is proven to be flawed. Again Christopher Hitchens statement concerning the importance of evidence to knowledge is proven truthful, within the context of the natural sciences.

The human sciences confront society. This makes any claims made within this area of knowledge subjective to society. Over time, many theories, economic models, observations and so forth find themselves at a loss due to a change in society. Still, within a certain context, certain laws, backed up by sufficient evidence can be seen as truthful. It involves inductive reasoning and predictive elements. In 1973 the economist Paul Ehrlich predicted that by 1990, 65million Americans would be starved. Within the context in which he made his prediction it was feasible. However due to a change in society’s nutritional values, environmental awareness and agricultural efficiency since then, his prediction turned out to be incorrect. This means that the human sciences are ever changing. Still, through our observations we can establish the validity of certain patterns. This is done either through holism or reductionism; our observations allow us to conclude certain trends and laws. In economics for example the law of demand is largely accepted as being true. The law states that ceteris paribus (all other things being equal) as a price for a good increases demand for that good will decrease and vice versa. This is not true for every good in the world and every consumer in the world, hover it models a trend in society which has been proven to be truthful. It focuses on how the masses would react rather than the individual.

In this area of knowledge it is almost possible to dismiss a claim even with the presence of evidence. It depends on your perception. Every individual has different factors influencing him. Culture, traditions, experiences, surroundings, intuition, all of these influence us and shape us into individuals. Consequently our views of the human sciences vary and certain established laws may not seem to apply to us, or may seem incorrect to us. A socialist would argue that the law of demand is incorrect, he would believe that if the price fallls, so does the demand for the good as people will only buy what they really need. This does not mean either theory is incorrect, it simply means that everyone has their own perception of society. With enough evidence both theories can be seen as truthful, however the socialist theory is based upon the assumption that mankind is never greedy. This has yet to be proven and more evidence supports the capitalist approach to demand. Christopher Hitchens statement once again appears to be truthful. As difficult as it is to correctly establish knowledge in the Human Sciences, it can only be done with sufficient evidence. Inevitably a claim can be dismissed just as easily if there is no evidence, or not sufficient evidence.

Religion has two ways in which we can look at it. The first deals with reason and the second with faith. If we purely use reason to analyze religion we would very quickly come to the conclusion that religion is irrational. There is no concrete evidence of the existence of a deity or multiple deities. This would mean that all knowledge of religion can be dismissed. The problem with this is that religion requires faith. Faith means that one is able to believe in something, even if there is no evidence for it. It is considered a ‘leap of faith’ as one decides to accept something as correct and truthful even though one cannot prove it. For people with faith (inevitably being anyone who believes in a religion) evidence becomes irrelevant. Seeing that the majority of the world is religious, Christopher Hitchens statement can be seen as incorrect. Religion can be seen as an area of knowledge simply for the reason that religions provide explanations to those who believe in a religion, about everything science cannot answer. It is a source of knowledge to those who have faith, constituting a majority of the world population. This does not mean that religion is correct, or the knowledge provided by religion is correct, however it means that a majority of the world is willing to see something as truthful without any evidence to back it up. In no way does this imply that the majority is right, simply that for the majority of the world evidence can be irrelevant. The same can be said for aithiesm. An athiest cannot prove that there is no deity, however without the evidence he is still willing to believe that there is no such thing as a deity. To some sense even this is faith. No matter what one believes, one cannot prove it to someone else, however it is our faith that our intuitions are correct that prove Christopher Hitchens statement to be false. The existence of faith, one way or another, proves that not all knowledge needs evidence.

Christopher Hitchens would argue "That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence." At first I did not agree with this statement, however it seems to be applicable to most areas of knowledge, with the exception of religion. That being said Christopher Hitchens statement is too generalized as it does not account for faith, which inevitably constitutes a major part of our society.

1. http://blogs.yis.ac.jp/13hwangj/tag/definition-knowledge-tok-ms-wilson/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Philip J. Davis and Reuben Hersh [↑](#footnote-ref-3)